

Daniel Ellsberg: Biography

I was born in Detroit in 1931. I attended Cranbrook School in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan on a full scholarship, graduated first in my class and won a full four-year scholarship to Harvard. In 1952 I graduated from Harvard with a B.A. degree *summa cum laude* in Economics. My senior honors thesis on *Theories of Decision-making Under Uncertainty: The Contributions of von Neumann and Morgenstern*, resulted in articles published in the *Economic Journal* and the *American Economics Review*. I then studied economics for a year at King's College, Cambridge University, on a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship.

In 1953, I volunteered to enter the U.S. Marine Corps Officer Candidates program, having been granted deferments earlier for my studies. I spent three years in the U.S. Marine Corps, 1954-57, serving as rifle platoon leader, operations officer, and rifle company commander, including six months with the Sixth Fleet during the Suez Crisis, for which I had extended my tour of duty.

From 1957-59 I was a Junior Fellow in the Society of Fellows, Harvard University, which provides three-year fellowships for independent graduate study. Later, while at the RAND Corporation, I earned my Ph.D. in Economics at Harvard in 1962, with a thesis on *Risk, Ambiguity and Decision*, which was recently published in a Distinguished Theses series (Garland, 2002). An article presenting the core of the thesis, *Risk, Ambiguity and the Savage Axioms*, published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* in 1961, has given rise to an extensive literature—over five hundred scholarly citations—on the so-called “Ellsberg Paradox.” (As of April 2, 2006, Google lists “about 38,000” items under this heading.)

In 1959, I became a strategic analyst at the RAND Corporation, under the delusion—acquired as a summer consultant at RAND the previous year and shared by all my colleagues and most of those who had access to Top Secret intelligence estimates—that a “missile gap” favoring the Soviets made the problem of deterring a Soviet surprise attack the overriding challenge to U.S. and world security. The error, which was not exposed for me until late 1961 and for colleagues with out higher-than-Top-Secret clearances not till much later, was comparable to the illusion in 2002 about Iraq's WMD's, though fortunately it did not lead to a U.S. preventive attack.

I had been drawn to the RAND Corporation because it was in the forefront of the emerging field of “decision theory,” the focus of my academic interests. Once there, I chose to apply my own work on individual decision-making under uncertainty to the most fraught, and possibly final, such decision in human history: the choice by the President of the U.S. or the Soviet premier—or, as I discovered, conceivably by one out of many of their subordinates—whether to initiate all-out nuclear war. Knowledge of the process leading up to this decision and its execution was among the most highly-guarded secrets in the national security apparatus, and my classified research required eventually, as mentioned above, clearances higher than Top Secret and almost unique

knowledge, for a civilian, of our nuclear war plans: a burden of horrific knowledge that has shaped my life and work ever since.

As a RAND employee on Air Force contract, I became during 1959-60 a consultant to the Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC), and during 1961-64, to the Departments of Defense and State and to the White House, specializing in problems of the command and control of nuclear weapons, nuclear war plans, and crisis decision-making. In 1961 I drafted the Secretary of Defense Guidance to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the operational plans for general nuclear war. In October 1962, I was called to Washington at the onset of the Cuban Missile Crisis and for the next week served on two of the three working groups reporting to the Executive Committee of the National Security Council.

Following this last experience—which taught me that the danger of nuclear war did not arise from the likelihood of surprise attack by either side but from possible escalation in a crisis—I spent a year studying past nuclear crises. I was named as sole researcher, with multiple high-level clearances, in an interagency study sponsored by the Policy Planning Council of the State Department.

In mid-1964 I joined the Defense Department as Special Assistant to Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs John T. McNaughton, on his promise that this was my chance to study high-level decision-making from the inside, as a participant rather than as a researcher after the facts. I was hired to work for him principally on Vietnam, then a low-level American engagement that had appeared to me totally unpromising for the U.S. ever since I had visited Saigon in 1961 on a Defense Department task force. But as McNaughton held out to me: “You want to study crises; Vietnam is a continuous crisis.”

That was confirmed on my first day—and night—as a full-time employee in the Pentagon. By coincidence, it was August 4, 1964, the occasion of a supposed—actually, illusory—attack on U.S. destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf and the beginning of our eight-year bombing campaign against Vietnam.

In 1964-65, by direction of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, McNaughton worked, with my assistance, on secret plans to escalate the war in Vietnam, although both of us personally regarded these as wrongheaded and dangerous. Unfortunately, by decisions of President Johnson and McNamara, these plans were carried out in the spring of 1965. With my country at war, I then volunteered to serve in Vietnam, transferring to the State Department in mid-1965.

Based at the Embassy in Saigon, I worked under retired General Edward Lansdale and later Deputy Ambassador William Porter, evaluating pacification on the front lines throughout South Vietnam. I relied on my Marine training to see the hopeless war close up, walking with troops in combat. After contracting hepatitis, probably on one of these operations in the rice paddies, I left Vietnam in June 1967.

On return to the RAND Corporation in 1967, I worked on the Top Secret McNamara study of *U.S. Decision-making in Vietnam, 1945-68*, which later came to be known as the Pentagon Papers. Having been authorized exclusive access to the entire

7000-page, 47-volume study for purposes of research on Lessons from Vietnam, I became the first person—other than the two project directors—to read the entire study.

In late 1968 and early 1969, I was a consultant to Henry Kissinger, National Security Assistant to President-elect Richard Nixon, organizing for him the first draft of his initial presentation to the National Security Council, on Options in Vietnam. I then drafted questions from him to the bureaucracy on Vietnam realities, uncertainties and policy—National Security Memorandum No. 1 (NSSM-1)—and helped summarize the Top Secret answers to these questions for the President.

Later that same year, as I finished my reading of the McNamara Study—a continuous record of governmental deception and fatally unwise decision-making, cloaked by secrecy, under four presidents—I learned from contacts in the White House that this same process of secret threats of escalation was underway under a fifth president, Richard Nixon. The history in the Pentagon Papers offered no promise of changing this pattern from within the bureaucracy. Only a better informed Congress and public might act to avert indefinite prolongation and further escalation of the war.

Just at this time, I met face-to-face young Americans—in particular, Bob Eaton and Randy Kehler—who were choosing to go to prison rather than to cooperate with the draft system and to participate in what they—and now I—saw as a wrongful war. I had sought to meet non-violent activists like this after I had spent a year reading Gandhi, Thoreau, and Martin Luther King, at the urging of a Gandhian activist I had met in 1968. I felt they were acting rightly, and that what they could do, I should be ready to do. Their example put the question in my head: *What could I do to help shorten this war, now that I'm prepared to go to prison for it?* In this light, which included a readiness to risk my clearances and career for actions that had some—not necessarily great—chance of being helpful, new approaches occurred to me. I embarked on several of these simultaneously. (See *Secrets*, chapters 17-20, attached).

As one of these, in October, 1969 I began photocopying, with the initial help of a former RAND colleague, Anthony Russo, the Top Secret 7,000-page McNamara study. I believed, as I set out, that I was almost sure to go to prison for the rest of my life for this. In November I began giving it to the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator William Fulbright.

Despite the invasion of Cambodia in 1970, Senator Fulbright still held back from bringing out the documents in hearings, for fear of Executive reprisal. He asked Secretary of Defense Laird to give him the classified study officially, but was summarily denied it. After still another invasion, of Laos in 1971, I gave most of the study to the *New York Times*. When the *Times* was enjoined from publishing it further after three installments—the first such prior restraint in American history, a clear challenge to the First Amendment—I gave copies to the *Washington Post* and eventually, when the *Post* and two other papers were also enjoined, to nineteen papers in all. For all these papers to publish these “secrets” successively in the face of four federal injunctions and daily charges by the Attorney General and the President that they were endangering national security amounted to a unique wave of civil disobedience by major American institutions.

Just before the Supreme Court voided the injunctions as conflicting with the First Amendment, I was indicted on twelve federal felony counts, posing a possible sentence

of 115 years in prison. My friend Anthony Russo, who had found a copying machine for me and helped with the initial copying, was charged on three counts. These criminal charges against a leak to the American public were just as unprecedented as the earlier injunctions. But after almost two years under indictment and over four months in open court, all charges against us were dismissed—"with prejudice," meaning we could not be tried again—just before closing argument, on grounds of governmental criminal misconduct against me. That was another first, in American jurisprudence.

What had happened was that when President Nixon had learned, shortly after my first indictment, that I had also copied the Top Secret NSSM-1 from his own National Security Council and given it to Republican Senator Charles Mathias, Nixon reasonably—though mistakenly—feared that I had other documents from his own Administration, including nuclear threats and plans for escalation which had yet to be carried out. He secretly directed criminal actions to prevent me from disclosing such embarrassing secrets, including the burglary of my former psychoanalyst's office in search of information with which to blackmail me into silence, and later an effort to have me "incapacitated totally" at a demonstration at the Capitol.

When these crimes became known, they led—besides the termination of our trial—to the criminal convictions of several White House aides. The same offenses, originating in the Oval Office, also figured importantly in the impeachment proceedings against President Nixon that led to his resignation in 1974. Meanwhile, in the political atmosphere accompanying these revelations of White House crimes and cover-up in the spring of 1973, Congress finally cut off funding for further combat operations in Vietnam: initially, in the House with respect to Cambodia, on May 10, the day before our trial was dismissed, and totally on August 15, 1973. Together, these developments were crucial to ending the war in Indochina in 1975.

Ever since 1969 I have pursued what amounted to two parallel careers, seeking as a researcher to improve understanding—my own and others'—of the very phenomena I and others were, at the same time, trying by our activism to change or avert: the dynamics and dangers of the nuclear era and of unlawful interventions, and abuses of the government secrecy system. Neither effort, it has seemed to me—of investigation or resistance—could safely be put aside to await the completion of the other.

Since 1975 I have given courses on the nuclear arms race at Stanford University, as Regent's Lecturer at the University of California—Irvine, Cambridge Hospital, and Harvard Medical School. On all the subjects above, I have given hundreds of lectures at colleges across the country and written many articles. But what I have to convey on all these occasions reflects not only my eleven years of government research and consulting but thirty-six years since then of continuous study and reflection.

As I wrote in the introduction to *Papers on the War* (see attached) about the Vietnam War as of 1972: "This war, I believe, needs not only to be resisted; it remains to be understood." I was referring to the fact that we had entered that war, and persisted in it for what proved to be three more years, for reasons that remained mysterious and controverted throughout the war and after it. Indeed, they remain so today, even to a reader of the Pentagon Papers, even somewhat to me after thirty more years of pondering

them in the light of successive new revelations. The same may well be true, years from now, about the "real" reasons for our involvement in Iraq.

But I have no doubt that my 1972 proposition has always applied as well to the nuclear arms policies of the U.S. and other nuclear weapons states. For thirty years, alongside the activism described below which remains a large part of my ongoing project, I have kept up with the latest revelations and analyses in this subject as well. These have helped shape my own evolving interpretations.

In particular, as indicated above, I first became aware in 1974—from Roger Morris, a former aide to Henry Kissinger—that my two preoccupations had secretly been linked more than anyone outside the White House knew. President Nixon had made secret nuclear threats to North Vietnam, and concrete plans to carry them out if necessary, as early as 1969. Indeed, Seymour Hersh later discovered from interviews that it was precisely Nixon's fear that I had documentary evidence of his nuclear threats and plans that led to his criminal efforts to silence me. In fact, I had not known of these. But Nixon's belief that I might have known was very plausible, given my closeness to several Kissinger aides who had seen such documents, and my own past high-level access on nuclear plans and nuclear crises, which he had discovered.

To my researcher's mind, for these very reasons the fact of my actual ignorance of these secrets was almost as noteworthy as the information itself. Morris' revelation raised the question for me: "If I didn't know anything about *this*, how many other past nuclear threats have I missed?" That started me on a hunt through memoirs and past- or newly-declassified documents and studies that revealed to me more than a dozen "secret nuclear crises." The list of these that I published in 1981 [attached: "A Call to Mutiny," the Introduction to *Protest and Survive*, ed. E.P. Thompson and Dan Smith] was a first in the academic or journalistic literature of the nuclear era. So was my interpretation of the pattern, which represented for me and for others a quite new understanding of the dynamics of the nuclear arms race and its dangers. I have spelled this out in a number of articles and interviews since then (several attached), including my successful application in 1986 for a Research Fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation on "The Construction of Instability." I attach this proposal in part for its expanded list of nuclear threats, which included a secret crisis involving Iran in 1980 that remains almost unknown to this day.

For the two decades after the ending of the Vietnam War, along with research, the focus of my activities was to help create a grassroots and lobbying effort that might lead to ending the nuclear arms race in the same way that that war was ended: by a Congressional cut-off of funds for weapons testing and further development. In 1992-93 this strategy, pressed by thousands of activists of whom I was one, succeeded in ending underground testing of nuclear weapons in the U.S.

In 1975-76 I was an organizer, participant, and fund-raiser of the Continental Walk for Peace and Social Justice, the first U.S. grass-roots campaign against nuclear weapons since the anti-testing movement of the early 60's. I was an early supporter of the movement for a Bilateral Nuclear Weapons Freeze, calling for a mutual end of nuclear weapons production and deployment by the U.S. and Soviet Union. For several years I was on the National Strategy Task Force of the Freeze campaign, which eventually joined with SANE (originating in the late 50's as the Committee for a Sane

Nuclear Policy) to form SANE-Freeze, on whose board I also served. This grassroots organization survives very actively as Peace Action, for which I am a frequent speaker.

I believed that the effort to reduce the dangers of nuclear war called for every form of political and grassroots activity that had helped shorten the Vietnam War—from letter-writing to Congress and editors to lobbying, political campaigning, lectures, teach-ins and demonstrations—in all of which I have participated. Likewise, I have sought to encourage and have participated in mass actions of non-violent civil disobedience, which had had such a powerful effect on my own decision to release the Pentagon Papers.

As a result, I have been arrested in non-violent civil disobedience actions close to seventy times, probably fifty focused on nuclear weapons: e.g. at the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Production facility, the Nevada Test Site, Livermore Nuclear Weapons Design Facility, and the vicinity of ground zero at the Nevada Test Site and at Vandenberg Missile Test Site. Other arrests have been for protests against U.S. interventions, including the approach to the Iraq War, and most recently near the Bush ranch at Crawford, Texas, over Thanksgiving, 2005: calling for an end to U.S. occupation of Iraq and seeking to challenge in court unconstitutional restrictions on First Amendment rights in Bush's home district. For the same purposes, others, along with Cindy Sheehan, and I plan to risk arrest again at the same location during Easter weekend in April 2006.

These many actions have resulted in scores of trials, in each of which we tried our best—with varying success—to use our defense to educate the public (as well as the jurors) on the policies we were protesting. I have also been an expert witness for the defense in a number of the Ploughshares actions—organized originally by the Berrigan brothers—and other trials. I attach [under separate cover] an affidavit I submitted for one such trial in 1987, in support of a "necessity" or "justification" defense for an action, otherwise illegal, undertaken to avert a greater evil. This affidavit has subsequently been presented—for the education of judges, prosecutors, and juries, and even defendants and their lawyers on the rationale of civil disobedience—in a number of such trials.

In 1978, when President Carter announced plans to deploy neutron bombs to NATO, I went into full-time activism to prevent this. Ever since I had discussed this weapon in the late 50's with my RAND colleague Sam Cohen, the self-styled "father of the neutron bomb," I had regarded it as a peculiarly dangerous invention, a nuclear weapon that looked "usable" enough to make it a likely trigger to all-out nuclear war. I felt compelled to spend most of the next year on the road, in Europe and the U.S., talking to European and American legislators, writing articles, and taking part in demonstrations and civil disobedience actions. This included the arrests mentioned above at the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Production Facility in Colorado, because it was scheduled to be the main production plant for neutron bombs. The expert testimony at our trial, by the leading experts in the effects of low-level nuclear radiation—Karl Livingston, Alice Stewart, Rosalie Bertell and John Goffman among others—laid the groundwork for the eventual closing of Rocky Flats as a radioactive public health hazard.

My time largely away from home extended to several years, because partly as a result of our very success—by European demonstrations and opposition in NATO legislatures—in causing President Carter to abandon his effort to deploy neutron bombs, Carter and later President Reagan embarked on a commitment to deploying cruise and

Pershing missiles to Europe. As an analyst of strategic instability (see papers attached) I saw this project as comparably dangerous to the one we had just blocked. Again this was largely a European effort, so I spent a great deal of my time in Germany—where the missiles were scheduled to be deployed—including widespread lecturing sponsored by the Green Party and the European Campaign Against Cruise and Pershing Missiles. I also took part in civil disobedience actions at Mutlangen and Bitburg, being arrested at the latter scheduled missile site along with Philip Berrigan and many others.

In 1982 I participated in a Greenpeace voyage to Leningrad to protest Soviet nuclear testing, which led to our being expelled from the Soviet Union and our Greenpeace ship being towed to sea under armed guard [see clips attached]. I was also invited by the Socialist Party of Japan, the backbone of the anti-nuclear movement there, to speak widely in Japan. This followed a press conference and a *Washington Post* article in which I revealed, and former officials Edwin Reichschauer and Paul Nitze confirmed, the long-term stationing of U.S. nuclear weapons in Japanese offshore waters, contrary to the U.S.-Japanese Mutual Security Agreement and the declarations of the Japanese and American governments. I had learned this in my classified command-and-control research in the late '50's for CINCPAC, Commander-in-Chief Pacific.

Meanwhile, though the Freeze Campaign won amazing levels of public support—between 80 and 90% approval in polls—no American administration came close to accepting it, even as a negotiating proposal. However, Reagan's response to its popularity, as well as to the European Campaign Against Cruise and Pershing missiles, included proposals to the Soviets for a "zero option" on intermediate range missiles in Europe. This was proposed by Administration hawks as a negotiating and domestic political ploy, but to their surprise it was accepted by the Soviets and expanded to medium-range missiles, leading to the treaty abolishing such weapons and terminating the deployment of cruise and Pershing.

As in the later success of efforts to end underground testing worldwide, grassroots movements—the Freeze in the U.S. and the anti-missile movement in Europe—had brought about a partial cessation of the nuclear arms race that was earlier opposed and scarcely imaginable by the leaderships of the U.S. and Soviet Union.

In 1992 I launched, in association with Physicians for Social Responsibility, a project called Manhattan Project II, aiming to achieve a consensus among anti-nuclear, arms control and disarmament groups on a comprehensive program of concrete steps to end the nuclear arms race and proliferation and bring about radical reductions in nuclear arms and ultimate abolition. We did achieve that consensus, among virtually all experts and arms control/disarmament groups outside the government—including many recent disarmament negotiators—on a program that remains wholly and urgently timely today. [See articles attached].

Unhappily, that continued timeliness reflects the fact that not one of the fourteen or so concrete steps—with the single exception of the test ban—has been accepted, let alone implemented, by the U.S. Government or any of the other nuclear weapons states. And even the testing moratorium is in jeopardy under the current Administration, which rejected the CTB and seeks to discredit all international legal restraint on U.S. military "flexibility." If a

new 9-11 gives President Bush an even freer hand, I believe that maintaining a testing ban will be as difficult—though as important—as preserving the First Amendment. U.S. testing would tip the world abruptly toward widespread proliferation, testing and deployment of nuclear weapons. Public education and political mobilization against the destruction of near-universal legal norms governing nuclear weapons has never been more urgent.

The title Manhattan Project II was meant to convey the possibility and desirability of acting to undo the legacy of the original Manhattan Project fifty years earlier—1942-45—with the same sense of urgency. In this case the deadline of three years was set by the scheduled reconsideration of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which was due to expire in 1995. Our hope for bringing about a radical shift in U.S. nuclear policy on the lines of our program reflected the encouraging reality that many, perhaps most, of the non-nuclear weapons states were calling for just such steps as condition for their agreeing to renew the NPT.

To dramatize our program and to put the goal of abolition of nuclear weapons on the international agenda, I launched a project to coincide with the 1995 NPT Renewal Conference which we called Abolition Fast. Many prominent peace advocates and anti-nuclear activists pledged to fast for one or more days during the Conference, in support of our concrete goals. The Reverend William Sloane Coffin and I fasted on water for the full twenty-six days of the Conference, maintaining a daily presence outside the UN while, in my case, lobbying actively with the delegations inside the conference rooms.

Although none of our hopes were achieved at the Conference—or since then—for a redirection of policy in the U.S. and other nuclear weapons states, the Fast during the Conference was credited with helping to motivate concurrently the organization of a global network of dedicated activists—*Abolition 2000*—which has persisted actively since then to press these goals during and between the two subsequent Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conferences. This organization sponsored my talk to the Review Conference delegates in 2005 calling for international support for Mordechai Vanunu in Israel and the ending of the Israeli government's restrictions on his speech and travel. [See attached articles]

In mid-1995, after the Fast and after speaking in Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the observances of the fiftieth anniversary of the culminating achievement of Manhattan Project I, the prospects of undoing that heritage by lobbying in Washington or even activism looked dim for the immediate future. I turned to writing two books that could convey to others—who want to understand the past and present in order to change it—what I have learned so far. The first, the story of my journey from a defense analyst to a peace activist, entitled *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, came out in October, 2002, which is where my previous section [attachment 2] on the history of my current work picks up. The other will be a nuclear memoir, based on my insider's knowledge of the dangers of our nuclear policies, calling among other things for worldwide nuclear glasnost. I wrote part of this in 1995-98 and will now turn, along with my other activities, to completing it, as a Nuclear Age Peace Foundation Fellow.

Writing this retrospective summary has made me unusually aware of how much of a piece my professional life has been with respect to my several ongoing concerns, as they extend into the present and future. That really begins fifty-five years ago, with my academic work on decision-making under uncertainty. Even my years in the Marine Corps played their part, re-directing my intellectual interest in decision theory toward questions of national security. That led me to the RAND Corporation and the Defense Department, where I became aware of the dangers of our nuclear posture in concrete, terrifying detail known to very few other civilians, including even high-level officials and dedicated anti-nuclear activists. And it led me to Vietnam.

Even if I had remained in universities I would probably have come to oppose the war, like so many others, and I would have been even more likely than I was as a "defense intellectual" to meet Gandhian draft resisters. But I would not have brought to that encounter the burden of knowledge and sense of responsibility from my experience in the Pentagon, in Vietnam, and the White House. I might not—indeed I could not—have responded to their example precisely as I did. As it was, their moral courage was contagious.

There has never been a greater need for such civil courage in our citizenry and officials. Will it, can it be evoked in time? To have a basis for hope, we must speak and act as if it can. That is what my life and work are about.